

## The Tricky Business of Spiritual Direction

For many years—actually decades, soon tending toward six of them—I’ve heard talk about spiritual direction from a wide variety of people, books, article and of course, YouTube. Sometimes people confuse this phrase with counseling, therapy and the like. Perhaps this is due in part to a falling away of religious practices, an erosion which has been going on now for several decades. However, things in that department seem to be on the rebound often though not necessarily associated with conservative overtones.

Thus to the uninitiated spiritual direction is simply a branch of psychology. However, it’s primary distinction lays in the application of practices associated with a long established religious tradition. These norms which have been proven over and extended period of time, decades or even centuries, are embodied in documents honored as genuine treasures. One proof of their validity is that they have been handed down from one generation to the next as viable guides to a life worth living. Ultimately I believe the origins of this venerable tradition go back to the ancient Greeks who put a primacy upon virtue or *arete* rendered as the best of anything.

Please keep in mind that I write this essay not as a spiritual director nor as anyone trained in assisting people in that regard. I’m simply not qualified for such an exalted role. All my observations put down here come from contact with *bona fide* spiritual directors as well as people who’ve done various types of counseling which includes spiritual direction. All have been most helpful in my regard. I’d go so far as to say life-giving. Therefore I’m simply giving an unprofessional report written as an interested spectator and above all, as a grateful recipient.

One motive for putting down my thoughts stems from a sense of gratitude of which I am aware on a daily basis. I’ve had the singular blessing to have been under the guidance of several extraordinary spiritual men and women...both genders included. Sometimes it’s difficult to come to terms with this because I look back with some embarrassment at how they put up with me. Such memories can be daunting and affect you even though some of these wonderful people are long gone. I should correct this by saying long gone physically but otherwise very much present.

There’s one important side note worth mentioning here. A good friend doesn’t necessarily fall under the heading of spiritual director. In fact, I’ve heard several

people in the know claiming that the two must remain distinct at all times chiefly because a spiritual director has to remain neutral. Thus narrowing down what a spiritual director actually does is a bit fuzzy and not known to a wider audience.

What prompted me to write this short essay was an occasion when both I and others witnessed spiritual direction had taken a wrong turn and had a negative impact on a number of people. Not only that, this impact tended to last a considerably long period of time. Some actually told me that they're still suffering effects akin to post-traumatic distress syndrome commonly known as PTSD. Whether or not that's true, the negative effects are undeniable. They may not be visible but the scares are present chiefly through unpleasant memories difficult if not impossible to shake.

At issue is a real person now deceased whose passing was somewhat shrouded in mystery chiefly to protect his legacy. He was responsible for having promulgated a type of spiritual direction which sought control of a person under his guidance. Looking back, it was done in the open chiefly I believe because it was sanctioned by his superiors. More on this later. The indicators that something somewhere was wrong? After having enjoyed two decades of prominence both nationally and internationally, within the course of two years he had experienced a prolonged decline of both his physical and mental powers. It was brushed off the same way we hear of a dictator's illness: vague details which did more to increase suspicion than to provide information.

It's precisely for this reason that I single him out as an example or better, a warning. I'm simply describing what I've heard from other individuals as well as having limited contact with this person himself. I wish to be very clear about that. The information that came to me was from several sources, essentially indirect but fairly consistent. One thing I know for certain. Even if you're not experienced in spiritual direction, often you can tell when something isn't exactly kosher. The larger group or community has a lot to do with this.

To start off, the person at hand began modestly enough. He had joined an active religious order and with time he gained considerable influence over others whom he attracted by his winning ways. I couldn't help but insert that observation because there's an element of truth in it. Having been ordained a priest, he was now in a unique authoritative position with regard to those who were younger or as they say in the business, are in formation. He was utterly confident of himself and didn't hesitate to put his foot forward when he had the chance. I had seen this on several

occasions and marveled at his ability to sell himself. At first I felt a tinge of jealousy but quickly realized I'm not built like that. From what I gather, most of us are not.

Early on there were signs that things weren't quite right. I could tell that trouble lay ahead not immediately not even longer but further down the line. For example, he was awkward at doing simple tasks and relating with people. Almost always he ended up dominating a conversation regardless of the topic. In sum, you could say that he lacked coordination both physically and psychologically. A sure give-away was his intense nervous laughter. For some reason or other these warning signs escaped notice by those in authority which made me wonder why. I suspect (rightly, I'm afraid) they were using him to further their own ends. He seems to have known it but went along for the ride with the intent of somehow profiting from the way they treated him.

I throw these observations out and leave them as such not wishing to indulge in any conspiracy theories. As I had noted earlier, chances are this lack of coordination manifested early on contributed to bringing about a death earlier than expected, one preceded by a lengthy decline mentally and physically. Nevertheless, that self-confidence enabled him to muscle through situations which would stymie the rest of us mere mortals.

With this brief description out of the way as it pertains to a person who was the inspiration for this brief essay, I'd like to throw out some observations garnered both directly and indirectly from those who had been under this man's guidance. I guess here is where we can apply the phrase spiritual direction as in connection with this essay.

I recall having casual conversations with some men who had been novices under this man's direction. The common consensus? A feeling of always being watched, of being "under the gun" as one fellow described it. Even more intimidating was being told that a person had to completely subject one's will to his by reason of his position. That is to say, he took the place of Christ instead of was a representative of him. From what I gather, that is a clear no-no when it comes to spiritual direction. In fact, nobody had to tell me or anyone else this was going on. Just simple observation revealed it was being practiced. The chief manifestation was a subtle yet distinct glumness emanating from those under this man's influence. You could tell they were wrestling with whether or not they should submit themselves fully.

I've come to admire those I know who had endured two and one half years of formation under this man. In my opinion each one had learned the hard way how to be a spiritual director! The experience garnered would be a boon for others which in several instances turned out as such. Just the other day I asked a priest now with a successful ministry about his experience as having been a novice. "Survive" was the only word he uttered. I could tell by his singular, spontaneous response that he was dead serious by the way he said it. Really, I felt uncomfortable at having been privy to an unnerving experience.

This interview, if you will, and several like it compelled me to find out what lay at the heart of this approach to spiritual formation which I believe was tacitly approved by those who were higher up the food chain. One response from another person who had been exposed to the same treatment summed it up neatly. The formation received was opposite that followed by a noted spiritual director he and many in his community were fortunate enough to have. The fundamental principle of this foundation runs literally and simply as "You have to be a good man first before you try to be a good religious."

The main point I took from this man's shrewd observation is that the issue is not about formation, not about structures, over-work, etc, important as all these things are. In essence the issue with regard to formation as it pertains to religious life is to bring people to healthy human maturity. I've heard of this before and in other circumstances. To sum it up, then, as in the case at hand it boils down to a spiritual director never violating the interior forum, a phrase often used in the business to represent one's conscience.

On the other hand, the crux of this inverted syndrome is, to borrow that man's words regarding his former director, "You can always do better, but the best is never good enough." In this scenario there's no finishing line and no acceptance of humanity with all its flaws and failings. The promise of Jesus prior to his passion and death is relevant here: "I will not leave you orphans. I will send you the Holy Spirit who will help to keep you fixed in the truth." A big part of that truth is recognition that the situation at hand is toxic and in fact deadly. Once we recognize that, no longer do we have to buy into any of it as far as the quote from John's Gospel and our conscience is concerned. The "perfection" which is put forth albeit subtly and in an attractive manner is seductive but totally fake. As for the damage done, it can last a lifetime.

An example always helps. I have in mind one not directly familiar to me but from a good friend who has a better handle on such matters. He survived two years of the novitiate under this man's spiritual direction and now is middle aged. He told me the story of another person in the same novitiate program. This fellow was told in no uncertain terms that he could do better at his present job. As for the work at hand, it involved doing the same task six days a week, three to four hours a day. To be sure, the fellow at hand was quick as well as meticulous in carrying out his responsibility. Upon being told to apply himself better, the look on his face said everything without the need to utter a word. It could be interpreted only in one way. It told him to go f\*\*k himself. In most circumstances this would have been grounds for dismissal. Fortunately it didn't turn out that way, for the community would have lost a valuable asset.

I mention this real life situation as an example where basic humility as well as humanity was lacking and was masked under obedience to one's superiors. Yes, obedience for such persons is the by-all and end-all, the criterion *par excellence* for living any form of religious life. A real possibility exists that once all these young men and women in the conservative congregations grow old (should that happen!), chances are they'll turn out to look haggard, worn out right to the bone. What's scary is that you can see seeds of this already taking root among them.

I had seen a number of people under the influence of the person just described who recognized the misdirected religious formation they were receiving. The problem was that most if not lacked the insight how to counter it. As one victim recently told me, the best way to cope was to submit and grit your teeth. I'm afraid that was the case right across the board while the man at hand was in charge. Again, his superiors didn't just turn a blind eye but consented to his approach. This tacit approval made it impossible for those under him to bring the matter out in the open.

While this was going on and bright, devoted young men were floundering. What I found dismaying was the contrast with the formation by members of the larger community. You could tell the difference right off the bat. These good men played an indirect yet real role in helping them simply by their witness and readiness to offer any assistance. I'd hate to think what would have happened if they were absent from the community. I got a clear tacit feeling that it was *forboden* to speak at any length with those in formation. Though never manifested, it was evident that the authorities wanted to "reform" the community as a whole, viewing their formation as—and I hate to use this word—perverted. Thankfully most who had been

subjected to such treatment learned to flourish in religious life, but it took a long time to grow out of what they had been exposed. However, like those suffering from traumas in the past, they clammed up if asked too many questions.

Although what I just presented took place some twenty-five years ago, I discovered remnants of it to be alive in the present as back then. Something like what I'm attempting to describe is never forgotten. It become part of you. The best you can hope for is ongoing support. Again, the analogy with PTSD is not inaccurate. The scary part is that those in charge are ultimately responsible and rarely if ever are held responsible. They know what's going on and are coy enough to keep a distance while at the same time keeping close eye on all everyone and everything. Despite this, we should remember that what they've been proposing through religious formation isn't based upon a sound foundation. Sooner or later it becomes manifest. What's false can't stay hidden forever.

One of the biggest fears expressed by several victims, if you will, is that a similar situation could arise again. Part of this fear lies in a new conservatism within the Catholic Church which is somewhat suspicious of the Second Vatican Council. The sad part is that some proponents advance a fairly narrow band of teachings developed in more recent centuries compared with the rich heritage stemming from the Church's earlier existence. In sum, the issue is lack of knowledge which has evaporated and is in danger of being altogether lost. Another element—perhaps most important of them all—is the lack of exposure to classical philosophical training which had formed a kind of superstructure for the Church's teaching. That teaching couldn't even be articulated minus that framework.

The saving grace in all this, at least one manifestation of it? In the case at hand the person around which much of this essay is focused had suffered what comes across as a nervous breakdown. On top of this considerable convoluted language was used to cover up what really had happened over an extended period of time. Not that his condition is a cause for joy but a warning. Interestingly I saw the same phenomenon in two other notable people of similar character, one of whom continues to wield influence as a spiritual leader and teacher. Is that then what happens to anyone who had been under their guidance? Hopefully not.

Also I've noticed that while most people who've been exposed to such a program retain some PTSD (for lack of a better way of putting it), they have come to realize they can grow out of it. As one person involved in all this remarked somewhat

harshly just a few days ago, these directors did all their dirty work in the name of God and for the good of the Church. People now are more attuned to such behavior. Perhaps this man came across a bit too harsh, saying it's no small wonder so few are entering religious life.

A quick side note, if you will. I'm writing this with a certain acquaintance with religious and monastic life as lived by men. I'm curious to know if women have the same experience. Unfortunately I haven't yet had the opportunity to find out. From my limited vantage point I tend to think their experience is basically the same. If it isn't, I'd be pleased to be informed.

There is an exception to the overall decline, although one should take it tongue-in-cheek. Some conservative communities are thriving and are full of young persons. You can come away impressed at the fervor and bright future they represent. However, a look on their faces reveals a remarkable parallel to the person who got the essay off the ground. All behave in the same robotic manner, smile with the same intense yet forced sense of humor giving the impression that all is well with the world. Then they return to their routine. If they are monastic as many are, the Divine Office is of course in Latin. Same with the Mass, both sung with great vigor but with a faint detection that they must do it as such. I've seen some of these videos on line and frankly, come away somewhat uneasy. It's impossible not to get a sense that something bordering upon the sinister is taking place in the background. What we see is simply a cover up. The other impression is that you don't see many (if any) elderly members of the community. That in and by itself speaks volumes.

On the other hand are those whom I like to call as the stalwarts. There comes to mind the positive but quiet influence of three monks I got to know, one a genuine ancient in his mid nineties and the other two well on the way there or in their mid to late seventies. What got me about the oldest fellow was that in his mid eighties...yes, mid eighties...for the first time in his life he felt a real presence of the divine. First thing that came to mind, what about all those years...decades...beforehand? I didn't dare ask, but instead listened in genuine awe. His words made me wonder if this God thing is for real or a concoction we each make up and develop as we go along. Of course I don't have an answer. The only thing I knew for certain was the radiance on the face of this elderly monk was undeniable.

The issue about God being real or otherwise didn't come up with the other two men. I should throw out the fact that they as well as the oldest had no real contact with

the person whose spiritual guidance was questionable. Nevertheless, the contrast between the three and those whom I knew had been formed under his direction was undeniable. The latter group seemed to feel the effects of a general traumatization, a vague but persistent identity as to who they are and that they were never up to par as to their respective vocations. Another way of putting it is that they were suffering from a perpetual doubt. This, of course, was totally unnecessary.

These three are faithful to their mode of life but all share a sense of uncertainty with regard to who or what God is. Instead of presenting a dreary picture, it had a wonderful after effect in that they are not in the least judgmental. One said if you don't know who or what God is, why bother judging people? As for the two younger ones, they're noted for their taciturnity. They speak only when spoke to which can give a somewhat negative impression. "Somewhat," however, turns out to be inaccurate. If you ask for any help, they drop anything and everything they're doing and come to your rescue.

Though I hadn't interviewed these two men (using that word loosely), I spent some time observing them when it was possible. Thus my observations are provisional since I don't live the same type of life as they do. Still, I've garnered sufficient material over time to draw some wonderful insights. Chief among their guiding principles is humility. By that I don't mean an ideal nor some standard against which to judge oneself. Rather, it's borne of hardcore experience of being (as one confided to me) a son-of-a-bitch. In other words, he started off not with just one chip on his shoulder but a whole bunch of them.

The other fellow was more reticent to speak of his background. However, I know that at an earlier age he was abused by his father and raised in a strict Catholic family which kept that abuse closely under wraps. He had entered the seminary later in life and then switched to a religious congregation. The reason? As he told me, organized religious life offered security. Even if he should suffer abuse which fortunately did not happen, he figured community life was large enough to seek out assistance. Then he stuck with a given daily program of life to follow which he did and continues to do with minor variance. He admitted to someone else that it was a way to keep him sane. To be sane was at the time a high enough goal. After a while he realized its limitations and despite continuing with his apparent rigorous approach, had loosened up considerably. Now he's what I'd call a close to perfect example of humility I've ever seen incarnate in a living person. Nothing artificial about it, purely natural.

So with these three wonderful men in mind, looking back on that fellow who got this essay rolling has changed my perspective on him. I started off somewhat grieved at how he ended up as a completely broken and almost insane individual. Even more, I was concerned with how he had affected those once under his tutelage. Then exposure to the three monks, one ancient and the other two tending in that direction, I could see the antidote. It's a willingness to admit your failings. That, of course, is an important starter. As you go along, you're bound to fail and fail often or perhaps better, on a continuous basis. What counts as one of these venerable men told me is a willingness to get up not just once a day but numerous times in the course of one day. Sounds like pious advice but go ahead and try it. This is where you learn humility right down to the bone.

There's a balance somewhat difficult to achieve yet within our grasp. This balance exists between being guided by a person with his or her limitations and falling back upon one's inner resources. The starting point is actively seeking out someone living your basic vocation. It's helpful though not necessarily so. Again avoid picking a friend. Usually it's good to choose a person older than yourself but not necessarily so. In this way you have a triad: his or her point of view, the official one from that person's background as in religious life and what you bring to the table.

Chances are that between the three you can work out something viable. The sooner you realize this, the better because the early years in religious life mean you're subject to a lot of scrutiny put in terms of evaluation. Generally it goes well. Those in charge need to be careful because nowadays the contrast between so-called secular life and religious life is more pronounced than in the past.

One major sticking point that emerges is one's relationship with family. I assume there has to be a sharper break between them and newbie, a challenge more difficult nowadays but once done properly, reaps great rewards. That challenge consists in how you comport yourself minus natural familial bonds and now rooted in the principles of sound spiritual direction. It's shaky at first but nevertheless if done right, pays dividends. Here's where you have to avoid falling under the guidance of someone who's willing to take the place of your family and be an ersatz parent wanting to control your life. The whole project is a gamble, really, but worth the while if it works out. By no means do you want to end up as that spiritual director who had become the theme of this essay. The best part in all of this? We're dealing

here with community life. Despite the risks, you're almost certain to hit upon living gems to support you as those I had mentioned and who continue to support me.

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